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■ The '60s ■ Nigel Poor ■ Roger Shimomura ■ Alison Saar ■ Susan Silton

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Steven Soderbergh's latest Hollywood hit *Traffic*, set on the U.S./Mexico border, prompted me to consider how this region is often represented in popular media. The film takes as its subject matter the drug trade, attempting to give an in-depth look at how U.S. forces try to curtail the flow of drugs into this country through Mexico. A cast of colorful yet downright deviant characters—underpaid cops, Mexican cartels, corrupt government officials, cold-blooded assassins and drug runners—populate the film, painting an image of the Tijuana/San Diego region as a hotbed of crime and corruption where drug trafficking is the main industry and its inhabitants look to turn a quick buck on illegal transactions. News reports and the media often portray the border region in a similarly negative light, as a point of influx for illegal aliens, crooks, drugs and all sorts of other undesirable influences. In reality, the U.S./Mexico border functions as a giant sieve, one that encourages a free flow of products across the border but acts as a blockade of human traffic, halting the flow of immigrants into the U.S.

The border patrol's domineering presence doesn't help nurture notions of safety and security in this region either. The border police, coupled with the reinforced barricades raised between the U.S. and Mexico, perpetuate feelings of suspicion, distrust and division amongst the different communities in these border towns. Together, the cities of Tijuana and San Diego can be seen as constituents of an urban landscape that is starkly divided by national, economic and class divisions. The artists and cultural critics who have made this region their home seem all too familiar with this phenomenon. A series of arts programs and site-specific installations called inSITE was generated in order to address social issues pertinent to this area and to nurture a dialogue between people who live on both sides of the border. This biannual program for public art invites artists from across the U.S. and Mexico to San Diego and Tijuana to take part in residencies and to create site-specific projects in which they communicate their artistic responses to the border.

The first series of inSITE programs, held in 1992, was originally developed to bring together arts groups located on different sides of the border. Over the past few years, the program has flourished into an important forum for public art. It hosts a variety of experimental projects that encourage cultural interventions, exposing the arts to a broad public and to non-traditional audiences. An added emphasis is also placed on social interaction, wherein artists spend time in communities in Tijuana and San Diego to create collaborative projects with and for the benefit of community members.

I'm no expert on the complexities of life in a border town. In fact, I've only passed through the U.S./Mexico border twice, once as a tourist on a trip to Baja, and the second time last November, for an inSITE2000 Exploration Weekend. During a guided tour of its public art projects, I was introduced to many inSITE curators and artists, discussing with them the ideas and motivations that prompted their investigations, thus gaining a better understanding of the social and economic complexities, contradictions and dualities that are a part of life in this region. And this is the perspective through which I'd like to talk about a small selection of public art projects organized by inSITE2000 (there are a total of more than thirty artists involved with inSITE this year): how it offers a view of life in the border cities of San Diego and Tijuana to people who might not be entirely familiar with its reality, shedding light on how this region has manifested many of the social problems and inequalities that accompany our globalized economy.

Many inSITE artists, including Brazilian-born, New York-based Valeska Soares, view the two cities on different sides of the border as two halves of a whole. The economies of both cities are closely linked, and there is a great deal of cultural exchange between the two—San Diego and Tijuana more closely influence one another than being influenced by New York and Mexico City, the respective cultural capitals of their nations. They are often viewed as one hybrid border town that has nurtured its own aesthetic, its own sensibilities and its own way of existence. Soares's piece, titled *Picturing Paradise*, makes a powerful statement about fluid boundaries, globalization and intercultural exchange in an act that, at least symbolically, attempts to unite the border towns. The artist has installed mirrored stainless steel plates on both sides of a fence that separates Border Field State Park in San Diego and

Playas de Tijuana, conjuring the illusion that the fence has disappeared. On top of the stainless steel plates, Soares has inscribed an excerpt from Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*:

The ancients built Valdrada on the shores of a lake, with houses all verandah one above the other, and high streets whose railied parapets look out over the water. Thus the traveler, arriving, sees two cities: one erect above the lake, and the other reflected, upside down. Nothing exists or happens in the one Valdrada that the other Valdrada does not repeat, because the city was so constructed that its every point would be reflected in its mirror...

The two Valdradas can be likened to San Diego and Tijuana in that these cities are mirror opposites of one another. We can see that they share much in common, but while their economies and cultures are interwoven, there are also huge inconsistencies between the lifestyles of the people who live on different sides of the border. NAFTA's Free Trade Agreement helped build Tijuana into a huge industrial force. The *maquiladoras* (assembly plants) that

have recently sprung up in this region have been a huge draw for Mexican laborers and have created a zero percent unemployment rate in Tijuana. People from all over Mexico migrate to this region in search of jobs. Unfortunately, working in the *maquiladoras* is a grueling occupation, and the wages very low. As the cost of living in Tijuana rises along with the city's rapid development and growth, the wages gained by workers in the *maquiladora* industry don't suffice, keeping the workers and their families at poverty level.

For his inSITE project, Polish artist Krzysztof Wodiczko took as his subject the women who work in Tijuana's *maquiladoras*. He interviewed these women and videotaped them talking about their lives, their stories of migration and their remarkable personal histories. The videotaped interviews will be projected outdoors, on the Centro Cultural Tijuana's sixty-foot diameter Omnimax Theatre during inSITE's final Exploration Weekend on February 23-24. Visible and audible from a great distance for everyone to see, the projections will communicate the private stories of these individuals to a broad public. Displaying an attempt to empower marginalized members of the community by giving them a voice, the interviews will adhere faces, names and individual identities to those who constitute Tijuana's industrialized labor force, people who are

often underrepresented by the media or overlooked by corporate forces.

As an artist based in Southern California, Glen Wilson has focused his inSITE project on Mexican immigrants living in San Diego and Los Angeles. *The Nomad Project* is a loosely edited sequence of video pieces interweaving portraits of individuals living in the border region, with imagery of the urban-scapes and landscapes that they inhabit. There are no clear narratives in Wilson's video pieces. Instead, the artist creates vignettes that suggest a narrative. One of the stories Wilson illustrates is that of an immigrant from Oaxaca named Miguel. Initially moving to this country with the dream of being a professional boxer, he has been bussing tables for fifteen years. Miguel is pictured in various surroundings that represent the different facets of his life: in his San Diego home, his backyard filled with species of plants indigenous to his native Oaxaca; in the restaurant where he works; and on the beach where he still goes to work out and shadow box every morning.

Wilson has thus created a multifaceted portrait of Miguel, someone who has integrated different cultural influences and a complex history into his life. "For Miguel, home does not exist as a distinct place," states Wilson, "he carries the notion of home inside his head." Wilson similarly views Californians as a population of nomads who are in search of a distinct notion of home. "The whole American dream is to set up a permanent home, but many people continue to live clandestine lifestyles," he states. DJ Smoke, a San Diego-based musician, is currently working on a soundtrack mixing hip-hop sounds and snippets of dialogue that will accompany the visual components of Wilson's videos. The culminating project will be screened the night of February 22 at the inSITE information site in downtown San Diego.

In her inSITE project proposal, New York-based film artist Judith Barry was concerned with the idea of creating a distinct network for the border. She wanted to curate a series of programs—films and videos—that would be broadcast on large, outdoor screens set up on the actual border crossing between the two countries. The programs would address pertinent issues

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relating to life on the border. Since the project was never approved by the U.S. government, Barry decided to create five individually filmed stories about border life instead. All of the stories that Barry based her short films on are true, having been adapted from local journalists who wrote about these events at one time or another. One deals with an upper-middle-class San Diego woman who has her car stolen by an impoverished immigrant, and the resulting confrontation that ensues between the two. Another story contrasts the life of a child in Tijuana to that of a kid living in San Diego. There are five stories in all, and Barry claims that she has prevented taking a distinct moral stance in their retelling. Instead, she attempts to represent each story from several distinct perspectives, encouraging a contemplation of the more complex social divisions that shape the lives of border populations.

Barry's films are currently being screened on multi-channel video monitors located in the street-level windows of an abandoned bank in downtown San Diego. They are screened from dusk to dawn everyday for random passersby to witness, the audio component provided through speakers mounted near the windows. The artist hopes to communicate these stories to a broad and diverse audience, noting that there is a large homeless encampment situated across the street from where her project will be installed.

A question posed in the program description for the recent "Worlds in Collision" conference at SFAI asked, "How do artists connect to community in an increasingly globalized economy?" This seems to be the main challenge for inSITE artists and curators as they execute this year's projects and plan ahead for the coming years. A close look at the San Diego/Tijuana border reveals that community is very much in existence, even amongst migrant populations in transient locales. Moreover, these regions seem to engender a hybridized culture that is teeming with innovation and creative potential. How to tap into this potential, turn it into something productive, and disseminate the lessons learned through spending time in these communities: these are the tasks that inSITE's public artists have taken upon themselves to carry through.